

thick papyrus swamp about 2 km upstream of the Kamuzu Barrage (which is in the town of Liwonde) and Robert Nyirenda, a game scout working in Liwonde National Park, has sent in a report concerning three separate sightings of a Shoebill in the Park, in December 1987 and in January and March 1988. This report is now being considered by the Rarities Committee in Malawi, but the probability that Shoebills have occurred there is great, especially as (according to Mr Nyirenda) the species is known to Malawians living in the area by the names of *Kokote* (Chichewa) and *Kongo-mupale* (Yao).

Shoebills occur in north-eastern Zambia, in south-eastern Zaïre (Maclean 1984) and in various swamps in western Tanzania (Britton 1980). The nearest Tanzanian swamp to Malawi is Lake Rukwa and a line drawn from there to Liwonde passes very close to the Nyika Plateau, but birds flying from any of the other swamps in Tanzania, Zaïre or Zambia would also pass close to the Nyika. The Shoebill soars to great heights (Maclean 1984) and considering that for several days prior to the Nyika sighting there had been low cloud and heavy rain, it seems quite possible that a Shoebill flying to or from the Shire River near Liwonde could have been blown off course and been caused to land on the plateau due to poor visibility. That the bird was not seen after the weather had cleared up, suggests that it departed as soon as conditions were favourable.

This first record is self-evidently that of a vagrant bird, but it seems likely that in the large areas of dense swamp in Liwonde National Park the species does occasionally occur; perhaps more frequently than the few apparent sightings suggest.

References

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First record of the Rufous Bush Chat *Cercotrichas galactotes* in Malawi

On 13 December 1987 a Rufous Bush Chat *Cercotrichas galactotes* was netted at Nchalo, Malawi (16°16S, 34°55E) in an area of semi-arid bush and grassland at an altitude of 60 m. The subspecies was not determined, because of the very worn state of the plumage, but it was either *familiaris* or *syriacus*, most probably the former (Dr D.J. Pearson *in litt.*, who also considers that it was a first year bird, on account of its pale-edged wing coverts and flight feathers). The description was assessed by referees in Kenya who are familiar with the species and the record has been accepted by the Rarities Committee in Malawi.

The occurrence of this Middle Eastern migrant in southern Malawi was entirely unexpected. It normally winters in arid bush and grassland in Somalia (see, e.g., Pearson 1989) and northern and eastern Kenya and the furthest south that it has been recorded previously was in the extreme north-east of Tanzania (Britton 1980). However, weather

conditions in Central and southern Africa during the latter half of 1987 were rather peculiar and many unexpected or rare species were seen in Malawi and elsewhere. Presumably the appearance of this chat, over 1000 km south of its normal wintering grounds, can be ascribed to the weather.

References

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Calling by the Red-chested Cuckoo *Cuculus solitarius* in relation to rainfall

In many parts of Africa the Red-chested Cuckoo *Cuculus solitarius* is known as the 'rain-bird', as it is believed that its call announces rain or is related to rainfall. This notion is so strong that Williams (1969) thought fit to include in his species description that it "Often calls immediately before rains break and known locally as the 'rain-bird'—its call being rendered as 'it-will-rain'." (See also Rowan (1983) on beliefs pertaining to this and related cuckoo species in southern Africa.) During a study period of four years in East Africa the author became interested in the influence on the local ecology of rainfall and in the predictability of this important ecological variable (Prins 1988, Prins & Loth 1988).

The accurate prediction of the moment of incipient rainfall, and especially of the start of the rainy season, is of paramount importance for farmers, for example: it is a common observation that the coming of the rains, or their failure, is one of the major topics of conversation in rural communities in East Africa. Meteorologists are not very well able to predict the rains (see, e.g. Johnson 1962, Brown & Cocheme 1969, Griffiths 1972, Tyrell & Coe 1974, Fleer 1981) and here I want to address the question of whether the Red-chested Cuckoo's calling fares any better in this regard.

Methods

From December 1983 to January 1985 rainfall was checked nearly every day at Ndala Research Camp in Lake Manyara National Park, Tanzania (3°30'S, 35°45'E) and it was also noted whether or not the Red-chested Cuckoo called. A day with rain was defined as a day (24 h) with 0.1 mm of rain or more. Observations on rainfall and calling were made on a total of 404 d. Association between calling and absence or presence of rain on the same day was analysed through χ^2 calculations per month and for the whole period. The same type of analysis was used to investigate whether the birds called significantly more (or not) on a day preceding a day with (or without) rain; for this purpose there were 401 pairs of observations available. Yates-continuity corrections were not applied, following Everitt (1977).